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**‘The willing women are standing waiting now’:  
British Women, the Second World War, and the Women’s Library at the  
London School of Economics and Political Science**

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University of Southern Mississippi



Figure 1. Women’s Library Reading Room  
(Photo by E. Doerner)

### Introduction

*“The willing women are standing waiting now: and the factories and workshops will stand waiting for us when they are ready and we are untrained.”*

– Teresa Billington-Greig, *Manchester Guardian*  
‘Letter to the Editor’, 26 June 1940

*“We were girls, you see – and what use were girls?”*  
– Victoria Wignall, ‘Just a Girl’, ‘Out of the Doll’s House’ BBC documentary, 1989

Since the end of the Second World War some 70 years ago, research and scholarship featuring wartime contributions of the average British citizen has focused largely on men’s experiences of combat, the various roles of government agencies, or the assumed viability and tenacity of political and military leaders. The role of gender in the experience of war was often a side-note, not a focus of research. Since the 1960s, and more frequently since the late 1980s, a new wartime perspective has begun to be documented and explored in academic and literary scholarship - that of British women.

This study examines primary materials located in the Women’s Library at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) that document the first-hand wartime experiences of British women. A brief overview of the Women’s Library and existing publications related to its collections of primary documents related to women and the Second World War will also be addressed. Summaries of key primary materials, the ability of these materials to expand knowledge of existing women’s wartime narratives, and their usefulness to future research endeavors will also be included.

A few brief clarifying notes about terminology: scholarly literature varies to some degree in terms used related to nationality and history. For the purposes of this paper, women considered to be citizens of Great Britain at the time of the war will be referred to as “British” and global war that took place from 1939 to 1945 will be referred to as “Second World War,” in keeping with predominant terminology used in British scholarship in this area.

### Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore and document a variety of key primary materials that are currently located in the collections of the Women’s Library at the LSE (often written “Women’s Library @ LSE”) and are related to British women and their first-hand experiences of the Second World War.

### Research Questions

R1. What are some of the key resources in the Women’s Library collection related to women and the Second World War?

R2. What do these specific resources tell us about women’s experiences during the Second World War?

R3. For what kinds of research problems or themes would these resources be useful to other researchers?

### ***Importance of the Study***

This study is important in that it specifically documents the Library's collections related to this important historical event and also mines contemporary published and unpublished accounts of life during wartime that are relevant to current scholarship in women's history, social sciences, political science, library science, and other related fields.

A complete and detailed analysis of every resource related to the research topic was not reasonable given the time constraints of the study, but key resources will be highlighted. This study will assist librarians, archivists, and researchers in better understanding some of the key resources to be found in the collections of women and the Second World War materials in the Women's Library.

### **Literature Review**

War, for many British women, was a complex burden, a heartbreaking trial, and also an opportunity. Not for the first time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were called upon by the nation to contribute to another effort against the tyranny of war. Women were heavily relied on before, during, and after the war to support vital industries and necessarily had to demonstrate endurance in body, mind, and spirit (Action, 2010; Carruthers, 1990; Holdsworth, 1988; Maddrell, 2008; Summerfield, 1983). Women worked in factories, organized evacuation schemes, charted maps, sewed uniforms, cooked food, mothered children, and built airplanes, bridges, and national policies – and even sang while they did it (Korczynski et al., 2005; Maddrell, 2008; Rowbotham, 1997).

Miraculously, Britain “mobilized its female population to a higher degree than any other nation engaged in the war;” however, most British men and women continued to think of women’s war work as “men’s work, temporarily taken on by women to help in an emergency” and soon to be discontinued and forgotten once the war was over (Carruthers, 1990;

Summerfield, 1998). Women, in some ways, gained independence from their pre-war circumstances and navigated newfound agency in a way that changed the dynamics of their personal identities; in other ways, they were restricted and conflicted in the roles they both selected and were forced into playing during the Second World War (Summerfield, 1998; Wilson, 2005). The state’s interference with domains that were traditionally within the realm of “woman’s world” in the home was occasionally irritating and patronizing towards women, and many resented government initiatives to “collectivize” responsibilities such as shopping and childcare (Summerfield, 1983).

Women’s feelings about their new roles were complex. Some women felt they had no right to take a job away from a man; others resented the new responsibilities and independence that came with war work; still others immensely enjoyed their experiences and felt depressed when not rated equally to their male peers (Holdsworth, 1988).

Consistently, women's wartime experiences and contributions were not publicly or privately honored in the same ways that men’s were during and after the war. As well as fighting for access to equal pay, unemployment insurance, and war injury compensation, some 60 years passed from the end of the war before a monument was erected in honor of British women’s wartime contributions (Figure 2). The monument has been described as displaying “women’s clothing worn during wartime occupations...reflecting the wide range of war service undertaken by women” but also has been called “disembodied” and “a metaphor for the spectral trace of the temporary presence of the widespread integration of women” by the very women to whom the monument is dedicated (Maddrell, 2008).

Occasionally, scholars argue that women’s stories have not been adequately told *by women* due to “the recurrent theme of modesty in the face of the heroic” but this does not sufficiently account for the long-time rejection of adding women’s experiences to general war historical narratives (Bruley, 2003; Maddrell, 2008).



Figure 2. Women of World War II Monument London (Photo by E. Doerner)

Much of the scholarly literature that has explored British women's experiences of war reviews the "ordinary woman" in the context of her peers as a group (Korczynski et al., 2005; Hyams, 2014; Rowbotham, 1997; Summerfield, 1998).

Alternatively, some researchers argue that there is no "ordinary" experience of war, as women live through war with unique backgrounds, skills, and expectations, and homogenization of their experiences does not capture these discrepancies (Action, 2010; Giles, 2000). Additional research has explored more general constructs of gender and power during wartime (Summerfield, 1983; Summerfield, 1998).

Penny Summerfield is mentioned repeatedly throughout the scholarly literature for her instrumental work on the subject, as well as her work with oral histories and other first-hand accounts. Since the 1980s, she has written seminal texts on women and their recording of wartime experiences, including her book *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (1998).

Eminent feminist scholar Sheila Rowbotham (whose papers are held at the Women's Library) writes of women's experiences of the Second World War in her book *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States* (1997). She notes similar major themes that other scholars such as Summerfield have explored that have colored many women's recollections of their war experiences. Other texts have been written that explore aspects of women's experiences of war, such as employment. *Bomb Girls; Britain's Secret Army: The Munitions Women of World War II* by Jacky Hyams (2014) relies heavily on oral history interviews with women who worked in the bomb factories during the war. Researchers have explored such varied topics as the role of music in factory work (Korczynski et al., 2005); women's employment histories and managerial experience (Wilson, 2005); and propaganda in visual mediums aimed at British women workers and housewives (Carruthers, 1990). Personal diaries and the intersection with wartime national and personal identity have been the topics of more recent research from Action (2010) and Bruley (2003).

The publications mentioned above all rely on large quantities of primary materials such as diaries, retroactive oral histories, government records and documents, institutional documents, popular media resources, and other key contemporary publications. Using primary materials located in archives can "seem constraining and daunting to the uninitiated, as well as reproductive of past hierarchies in the material they hold," however, "they can also be spaces of counter histories" and, at least in the case of disadvantaged groups such as women, honor the "multiplicity of...experience" (Maddrell, 2008).

Clearly, tangible written and oral interactions can be found between the "individual subjective experience of war and the larger context of public history" in primary materials located in women-focused archives (Action, 2010). Due to the role those interactions can play in understanding and expanding socio-historical war narratives, it is imperative that today's researchers are well versed on types of primary resources found in these archives, the Women's Library among them.

Current literature on British women's experiences of the Second World War relies heavily on materials housed in institutions such as the Imperial War Museum in London and other industrial and governmental "wartime" repositories. However, few of these publications use Women's Library resources as primary materials in the research process. For example, David Doughan wrote about the current state of the (then-Fawcett) library and mentioned several key resources in the collections but did not cover those specifically related to the Second World War (Doughan, 1992).

More recently, Heather Dawson, an Academic Support librarian at LSE, wrote a paper covering "primary and secondary source materials relevant to the academic study of law, gender and sexuality," but did not specifically cover any key items related to women and the Second World War (Dawson, 2015). Additionally, the Library's website does not mention that the Library holds materials related to the Second World War. Researchers interested in conducting wartime projects using primary resources will likely not think to investigate the Library's collections, which clearly would be unfortunate. This paper aims to fill that gap in the current body of knowledge by investing the holdings at the Library that cover the intersection of those topics.

### ***The Women's Library***

The Women's Library at the London School of Economics and Political Science "documents all aspects of women's lives, with an emphasis on the lives of women in the UK and the great political, economic and social changes of the last 150 years" (LSE, 2015). Library holdings currently consist of 60,000 books and pamphlets, 3,000 journal titles, 500 archives, and 5,000 museum objects (LSE, 2015). The Women's Library has had a complicated history. Originating in 1926 as the Library of the London Society for Women's Service, the Library has been part of the London Metropolitan University, was included as the Fawcett Library and housed for a while at the City of London Polytechnic (later Guildhall), and finally transferred to the LSE library in 2013 (Dawson, 2015).

The Women's Library now is connected to the British Library of Political and Economic Science, which was founded one year after its current home, the London School of Economics and Political Science, founded in 1895 (Dawson, 2015).

Access to materials located in the Women's Library collections is available to library members (anyone may apply for membership upon proof of address and ID) and an email requesting particular documents for review must be sent to Library Enquiries staff a few days in advance. The Reading Room is a brightly lit space with ample room for researchers (Figure 1). Posters that outline "Data Protection Guidance for Reading Room Visitors" and "Guidance for Photography in the Reading Room" are placed on each table. The Data Protection Act of 1998 indicates rules and regulations for the safe handling of personal data of currently living people (Information Commissioner's Office, 2015). Researchers are allowed to take non-flash photographs of collection materials under the conditions that they will not be used for any commercial purposes and are gathered without the intention of publishing; if otherwise, written permission must be obtained from the copyright holder(s).

### **Methodology**

The research for this project was carried out in a sequence. First, the researcher accessed the Women's Library archival collections catalog (<http://twl-calm.library.lse.ac.uk/CalmView/>) and conducted basic and advanced searches using combinations of keywords and relevant terminology to discern what kinds of materials were related to the research topic. Initial search results indicated around 57 records related to "women" and the "Second World War" and subsequent searches narrowed those records to materials relevant to first-hand accounts. The research problem statement was expanded from just "oral histories" to include other types of first-hand accounts, such as written accounts of experiences in correspondence and personal papers, as fewer oral histories than were expected were readily available. Requests for specific materials were sent to the Library Enquires email account to

reserve them for viewing and also to reserve a space in the Reading Room for particular times and dates.

A series of four in-person visits to the Women's Library Reading Room allowed the researcher to view relevant primary materials, take notes and photographs of materials, and gain a better understanding of the Library's treatment, organization, and display of these resources. An additional visit was paid to the Wellcome Library to view videotapes of audio interviews. Relevant secondary sources were located by entering similar search strategies of keywords and phrases (e.g., "British women", "gender", "Second World War", etc.) into database packages specifically related to Women's Studies, Political Science, and History, *Library Literature and Information Science Full Text*, *Library Literature and Information Science Retrospective*, and other general resources like *Academic Search Premier* and *Google Scholar*.

Additionally, *LSE Research Online* was searched for possible relevant publications. *LSE Research Online* (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/>) is an online resource managed by LSE Library Services that serves as an institutional repository for books, book chapters, journal articles, and conference presentations that have used the collections at LSE and have been produced by LSE staff. Searching on a combination of terms such as "Women's Library", "Second World War", "women" and many other variations of these did not lead to collection analyses relevant to the specific topic of this paper. For example, a recent conference paper documented the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom collection (which has some connection to the Second World War) did not discuss the range of the entire Women's Library collections in terms of war-related materials (Horsler, 2014).

Upon physically viewing the primary materials located in the Women's Library collections, it was noted that the materials were often packaged in file folders or boxes, but no itemized list was attached to describe what was contained in the files. In all cases, no item order was presented and very few folders and boxes were marked with clear origin locations or

dates. Individual pieces within larger folders or boxes of material were not individually counted and cataloged; for example, a file would be cataloged as one record, regardless of if it contained one or 100 individual pieces. This presented some interesting challenges for organizing and making sense of the materials contained within.

## **Results**

### **R1. What are some of the key resources in the Women's Library collection related to women and the Second World War?**

#### ***Newspaper Clippings***

Hundreds of newspaper clippings and albums of articles related to women that were published during the war years (Ref. No. 10/25/1 and Ref. No. 10/25/2) give researchers some insight into what was being widely published during the first few months of war, beginning September 1939 through around the same time the following year. Collected from newspapers such as *The Times*, the *Evening Standard*, the *Evening News*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Radio Times Supplement*, and some American newspapers (e.g., *New York Times*), every article had something to do with either women in general (or in some cases, a particular woman) and the new realities of war. Some of these clippings were pasted in a bound album while others were loosely filed.

#### ***Photographs***

Photographs (Ref. No. Twl.photograph – Photograph Box F01) show a multifaceted picture of women during wartime. Upon viewing the album, it was clear that documentation of women during the First World War was a much stronger element of the collections than of women during the Second World War. However, Second World War photos provided a strong contrast in terms of how women were viewed, the types of work they did, and changes from the First World War to the Second. Some photographs were clearly taken by a professional photographer and are posed; others are quite candid and look to be taken by an amateur. Often the photographer was not identified on the photograph; none were identified in the item records.



### **Marjorie Hayward, O.B.E. (1905-1974) Personal Papers**

Materials in Marjorie Hayward's personal papers (Ref. No. 7MJH/H/10, Box No. FL459) provide extensive documentation in the early years of the war as to the relative efficacy of planning and preparations for women's war work. Hayward had a background in journalism before she began working at the Ministry of Labour in 1940 (where she was a member of "Headquarters" staff). A biographical sheet included with her personal papers suggests that Hayward's "great interest was the subject of 'women and work' ...her position in the Ministry enabled her to be much involved." Her files include handwritten and typewritten notes and documents (signed and dated), statistical analyses and reports, personal and professional correspondence, and other ephemera. Also included are chapters from an unpublished manuscript on "woman-power during the war" rejected by publishers in 1960.

Modern scholars have written about a well-known National Conference of Women event which took place in Royal Albert Hall in London on September 28, 1943. This event was criticized by some for its heavy reliance on male leadership and its apparent symbolic rather than meaningful approach to women's problems (Carruthers, 1990). Six thousand women attended, and tickets and programs to this event can be found in Hayward's papers (Figure 3).

### **Out of the Doll's House Project**

*Out of the Doll's House* (Ref. No. 8ODH) is a complex project focusing on women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that was created in the late 1980s by an all-woman production team led by Angela Holdsworth. This multi-year project included an 8-part BBC documentary miniseries, a published book, and a series of oral history interviews. The Women's Library has several interview transcripts and recorded tapes in its collections; however, due to the Data Protection Act of 1998, the majority are not yet available for researchers to access because of still-living participants and issues surrounding personal data and confidentiality (Information Commissioner's Office, 2015). The transcript records currently accessible are those of women who were confirmed

to be deceased at the time of cataloging. The cassette recordings were not yet all cataloged and not accessible. The Women's Library does not hold the videotapes of the actual BBC documentary produced for *Out of the Doll's House*; these videos were viewed at the Wellcome Collection's Library in London.

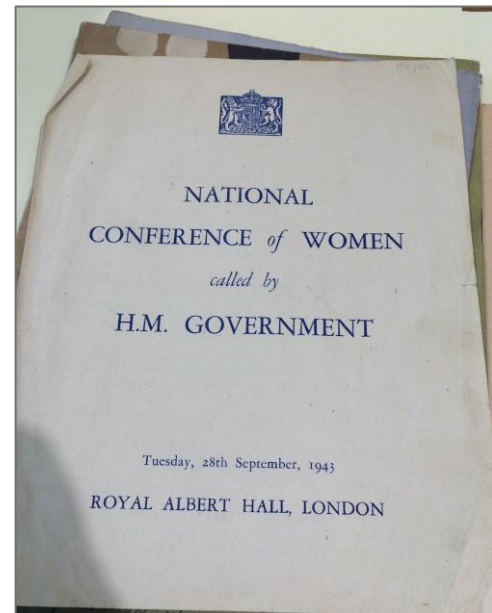


Figure 3. National Conference of Women Program, September 1943, personal papers of Marjorie Hayward (Photo by Erin Doerner)

### **Teresa Billington-Greig (1877-1964) Personal Papers**

Teresa Billington-Greig, a "well-known feminist and a leader of the Women's Suffrage movement" (according to her 1940 contemporaries at the *Manchester Guardian*), has left a treasure trove of documentation of wartime experiences in her personal papers (records consulted include Ref. No. 7TBG/2/S/15, Ref. No. 7TGB/2/S/17, and Ref. Nos. 7TBG/2/S/01-09). She wrote extensively, from typewritten reports to handwritten notes scribbled on tiny scraps of paper, on nearly every topic related to women and the Second World War, as viewed through her unique experiences. Billington-Greig's papers are filled with ephemera; press clippings; drafts of speeches, presentations, and letters to the editors; publications both targeting women and written by women; and her own personal correspondence with professional and personal contacts in London and elsewhere. She volunteered

as an evacuation escort, was certified in First Aid, wrote constantly to a wide range of organizations and women's clubs, and was one of four directors of The Business and Professional Women's Club Ltd.

## **R2. What do these specific resources tell us about women's experiences during the Second World War?**

### ***Newspaper Clippings***

Earliest dated articles mention possible conscription for women, postings for open positions, discussions of what women should wear during the night raids (slacks), personal stories of women volunteering for service again after serving in the First World War, interviews with women working in a variety of wartime jobs, and a slew of advertisements aimed at helping women maintain their femininity now that they had to wear a uniform or abandon lipstick and nail varnish. As the war progressed, the distinct change in tone from light-hearted fashion advice to tense concerns over women's unemployment, lack of support for suitable childcare, and unfair labor practices was made quite clear. A few articles reporting sexual violence against women are included amongst various files. Gender is always used as an adjective in headlines and article text (e.g., women police, girl bus conductors, etc.), perhaps adding to the sense that women doing war work was novel. Of interest is the fact that many of these articles are written by women or treat women as interview subjects for case studies, or both. Some editorial control has likely influenced the final content, but these elements still capture the contemporary "women's experience" as published for a widespread audience. Many articles written by women fall on both sides of hotly contested issues, providing glimpses into the very different ways that women might interpret a specific event or topic.

### ***Photographs***

In First World War photos, women are shown doing very dirty jobs, such as working in tanneries; working in glass, terra cotta and boot factories; as millers and wool weavers; as tree clippers, gravediggers, and carpenters; making bread, washing donated shoes and making steel helmets. In the Second World War, service women are shown plotting aircraft on large

maps, working in industrial factories, and "digging for victory" by growing their own gardens. Some of these photographs are stamped with "publicity photograph" on the reverse; thus, women in the Second World War whose experiences are captured on film "in the moment" look more cheerful and eager to complete their work.

### ***Marjorie Hayward, O.B.E. (1905-1974) Personal Papers***

Hayward's papers include a copy of the *Survey of Woman Power Problems*, a report generated from data gathered from July to October 1942 and issued in November of that same year. It offers a tangible scope to the problem of needing more women to work to support the war effort. Conclusions and recommendations of the report offer perspectives on how women may be more effectively approached and encouraged to contribute to governmental demands. Hayward gathered information from a multitude of sources and wrote reports regarding her interactions with women, thereby incorporating her own perspectives into what "could" and what "should" be done.

### ***Out of the Doll's House Project***

Several women's interview transcripts were consulted and also viewed on video recordings, including the following women who discussed their experiences of the Second World War: Irene Angell, an office worker in London; Kathleen Halpin, a member of the National Society of Women's Service and Regional Administrator for the Women's Voluntary Service in London; Gladys Gregory, who worked in an aircraft factory in the First World War and was disappointed to not work in a factory in the Second; Ethel Dean, a seamstress of "battledresses" at a textile firm in London's East End; Annie Fry, a tram conductress in the First World War who was prevented from working on the trams again in the Second World War by her husband, and instead stayed at home with her children; and Hilda Clinkard, who worked in a wartime department in the Ministry of Supply. The enormous variety of employment, volunteer work, educational level, marital and parental status, and perspectives on the inevitability of war and women's role in it within just these six



examples is completely staggering. Perhaps women's wartime experiences should be considered predominantly homogenous only by grave error.

### ***Teresa Billington-Greig (1877-1964) Personal Papers***

Billington-Greig wrote about and documented an incredibly wide-range of issues, not limited to: equal compensation for equal work, insurance benefits, equal compensation for war injury, unemployment insurance for married women, illegitimate "wartime" children born to unmarried mothers, child labor reforms, employment of women based on specific criteria (e.g., age, educational level), pensions for older women workers, censorship, evacuation schemes, and food rationing and supply issues. She routinely tracked employment statistics and pay-rate changes comparing women to men. In a lengthy letter to a friend, she records her own experience of living in London during the Blitz, beginning her handwritten statement with, "The attack on London began almost as soon as you left, and has continued ever since..."

### **R3. For what kinds of research problems or themes would these resources be useful to other researchers?**

#### ***Newspaper Clippings***

What is included in these clippings is just as important as what is not included; however, this can be difficult to gauge, given they are removed from their original context within the newspaper page. It was interesting to note when duplications would appear (e.g., copies of the same article saved by two different people). Was this happenstance, or was this a particularly important event or topic that resonated with many women? In some ways, these collections of clippings can be read as an "authorless" narration of one particular perspective. By engaging with popular media, these articles can tell researchers about how women interacted with the narratives that were being shaped concurrently about and around them.

#### ***Photographs***

Researchers looking to compare some similarities and differences between the wars will find striking evidence in these photographs. Both young and older

women are working in a variety of roles and positions. During the First World War, a greater number of older women are seen to be working in manual labor or unskilled work, appear to be physically dirty from their work, and are wearing "man's" clothes or simpler versions of women's clothes. The photography is candid and not posed. In the Second World War, women are dressed in nicer clothes or in official uniforms, are shown doing skilled work, and many images have a hint of "propaganda" to their composure, content, and display. Research investigating the role of visual propaganda featuring women and work during the Second World War would be well served by viewing this sequence of images.

### ***Marjorie Hayward, O.B.E. (1905-1974) Personal Papers***

Correspondence between Marjorie Hayward and other women who were in leadership positions confirms for researchers the massive difficulties of organization when it came to women and the war. Her personal notes from Ministry of Labour meetings and letters to acquaintances and friends document the logistical complexities of suddenly needing to rely on women-power for the security of the nation, but being faced with challenges of not always knowing how to organize or mobilize these new forces. Researchers will also get a sense of what it was like to be a woman working in the Ministry of Labour during the Second World War and the efforts made by a woman on behalf of women working within the governmental sphere.

### ***Out of the Doll's House Project***

Researchers interested in oral history accounts and recollections of war should be careful to recognize the differences between "traditional" oral histories and interviews conducted for the purposes of a television documentary series. Most of these women were born in the late 1890s or around the turn of the century, and so give substantial voice to middle-aged women's insights and wartime experiences, a perspective that researchers often remark is frequently over-looked in academic scholarship. A wide variety of experiences are captured in these

interviews, which would make for additional depth for researchers interested in diverse narratives.

### ***Teresa Billington-Greig (1877-1964) Personal Papers***

Billington-Greig often reviewed a newspaper article or government report, generated impressions and responses, and drafted a list of “next steps” for personal use or to send out to her contacts. However, much of her personal writing is not dated, which presents challenges to researchers needing to piece together the sequence of her papers. She occasionally re-writes or expands upon existing written notes, which allows researchers an interesting insight into the development of her thought processes over time. Her personal papers present a captivating snapshot of daily life during the Second World War and, in a way, form a “narrative” much like diary entries would through her habit of writing small notes regularly. She was a woman with connections, yet her papers allow researchers to explore her private world of frustration that even with her assumed privileges, she could not do more to promote the interests of women.

### **Conclusion**

This study serves to highlight some of the key resources associated with women and the Second World War currently held at the Women's Library. It also provides researchers with a sense of how these materials confirm and extend impressions of women's known wartime experiences, as well as provides general suggestions for types of research projects that may be well served by referencing these collections. A variety of first-hand experiences during the Second World War are represented in contemporary press clippings, newspaper articles, professional and amateur photographs, personal papers of women, oral history interviews and other ephemera, when taken together, all serve to tell the complex story of women and war.

Scholars have written about major events that women such as Marjorie Hayward attended. Kathleen Halpin, an *Out of the Doll's House* interviewee, had newspaper articles written about her, the clippings of which were saved by other women. Teresa Billington-Greig captured in “real-time” events and ideas that

were referred to later in oral history accounts by other women. For as much as wartime experiences appear to be unique, there is indeed a “universality” to having all lived through those dark days; yet, as much as war is universal, individual women have lent their own words and voices to tell their unique stories and perspectives of war. Future research on women's wartime experiences would do well to continue a nuanced approach to investigating their complex histories.

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